Isidore Rift

Tools of Spiritual Oppression

Foi Bahaïe et emprise sectaire © 2025 by Isidore Rift is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.
To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/

Author's foreword

The following text is a homemade translation of the first chapter of *Foi Bahaïe et emprise sectaire*, which was written in late 2025. The remaining chapters will follow in a forthcoming English edition entitled *Spiritual Abuse in the Bahá'í Faith*. This book will explain how the current culture of spiritual abuse was gradually introduced and consolidated into the Bahá'í community. A second book, *Investigating the Covenant*, will expose the doctrinal weaknesses underpinning Bahá'í authority.

The present document provides a brief overview of the mechanisms used to keep members of the Bahá'í Faith under control, all of which are listed and summarized from pages 22 to 24. A bibliography is included at the end.

This document is not a scientific study, but a field guide to the mechanisms of spiritual control that the reader is likely to encounter within the mainstream Bahá'í community.

Tools of Spiritual Oppression

Few religions enjoy a better reputation than the Bahá'í Faith. In its public communications, the community advertises itself as a modern, peace-oriented and rapidly expanding world religion that welcomes every year countless new believers into a millions-strong global family.

Despite its Islamic roots, the Bahá'í Faith wishes to be seen as fully compatible with Western values. To that end, its leaders have spared no effort to give the Faith a respectable face in the eyes of journalists, politicians, and the general public. This is why Bahá'í officials wrap their teachings in the language of progress, insisting on the promotion of ideals such as tolerance, critical thinking, gender equality, and social justice. The Bahá'í creed itself is often summarized as a "triple unity": the unity of God, the unity of all religions, and the unity of the human race.

Taken in by the Bahá'í message, reputable newspapers like to publish glowing articles in its favour. Let us quote, for instance, this piece by William S. Hatcher, published in July 1999 in *Le Monde Diplomatique* under the title *La foi baha'ie, un humanisme contre les fanatismes* (English: "The Bahá'í Faith: A Humanism Against Fanaticism"): "Neither a cult nor a syncretic movement, the Bahá'í Faith is an independent religion, on the same footing as Islam, Christianity, and the

other great religions. Born in Persia one hundred and fifty-six years ago, advocating from the outset social justice, tolerance, and equal rights for men and women, the Bahá'í Faith is spreading slowly but surely across all continents despite the persecutions it faces — particularly in many Muslim countries. There were only four hundred thousand adherents at the beginning of the 1960s; today, there are almost six million. And everything suggests that their growth will accelerate, so timely is the Bahá'í message."

Bahá'ís claim that their religion is the only way to deliver mankind from its never-ending torments. Their beliefs rest on the unshakable faith that the prophet Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) has revealed to them every solution needed to end war, racism, pollution, poverty, and crime, and, at long last, to finally bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth and harmony among its peoples. By spreading their message, Bahá'ís seek to draw the attention of liberal-minded people in need of a "soft spirituality." Like many others, they are eager to tap into this well-meaning and suggestible target audience already pursued by a multitude of dubious organizations, such as New Age groups.

However, many observers, both inside and outside the community, have long pointed out a profound discrepancy between the ideals professed by Bahá'ís and the moral reality of their milieu. Whether they are apostates, dissidents of the Faith, social scientists, enemies of the religion, or even faithful adherents, their criticisms all converge on the same troubling conclusion. Taken as a whole, their comments piece together the broader picture of a cultish organization hiding behind a

humanist façade to carry out a hidden agenda of exploiting its followers and pursuing the political conquest of nations.

Unfortunately for seekers of truth, the facts do reveal that the Bahá'í community is in fact governed by an authoritarian bureaucracy that resorts to denunciation, excommunication, blackmail, and censorship to advance its interests and defend its image. Instead of concerning itself with the spiritual life of the community and the well-being of its members, the current organization simply ignores both and actively channels the movement's entire energy into a self-sustaining propaganda machine that keeps them in a state of spiritual submission. Moreover, the vast majority of the texts Bahá'ís hold sacred are concealed by their leaders, who for 150 years have refused to translate and publish them.

Former members are now speaking up against the community's hypocrisy. A growing number of critics denounce the display of progressive values in Bahá'í promotional materials, arguing that Bahá'ís actually uphold a reactionary worldview tinged with misogyny, racism, and homophobia. And indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that believers must endure quite a few paradoxes. For example, they must somehow reconcile the religion's professed gender equality with the absolute ban on women serving on the supreme governing body of the Faith. It also doesn't help that Bahá'ís claim to stand at the forefront of the struggle against prejudice, while holding as scripture certain writings that portray the peoples of Africa as animal-like savages, and homosexuals as sick individuals in need of medicine and prayer. It is therefore legitimate to ask how believers are brought to endure such contradictions without rebelling against their institutions or recanting their faith.

To explain this apparent docility, we have to look at how the Bahá'í religious system was precisely devised to make its followers bend to the demands of their masters. This authoritarian design first takes shape through the promotion of etiquette meant to curtail personal freedom. Quietly imposed as a moral compass and a source of virtue, this etiquette serves to suppress four forms of activity: 1) theology and hermeneutics, 2) independent and self-initiated Bahá'í projects, 3) political expression and participation in labour unions, and 4) humanitarian work. By discouraging or prohibiting these activities, the Bahá'í system is trying to limit the believers' thought, speech or action to the narrow confines of its institutional lifestyle. Their energies can then be channeled back into the community's "administrative life" and teaching activities. This "administrative life" — an expression that is actually used in Bahá'í circles — consists of meetings and other events during which Bahá'ís discuss ways to propagate their religion. Teaching activities, for their part, mainly revolve around the "Ruhi Institute", a workbook-based curriculum devoted to the study of scripture. Its course materials, modelled on fill-in-the-blank exercises, serve two main purposes: to standardize officially approved beliefs, and to keep the questions of both believers and "seekers of truth" within predefined bounds. Members of the Faith are thus encouraged, if not required, to devote their time and energy to under-stimulating tasks that deprive them of spiritual and intellectual nourishment while thickening around them an atmosphere of social conformity.

Another mechanism of control lies in a culture of martyrdom in which Bahá'ís are expected to sacrifice their aspirations, their possessions, their personal opinions, and even their lives, on the

"path of service." A recurring emphasis on the Faith's legendary heroes is meant to foster a longing for trials and suffering in the name of a dogmatic truth. Within the community, all are called to emulate the resolve of martyrs who endured brutal torture in body and mind. Against the backdrop of the unspeakable torments described in the lives of the saints, sacrificing "just" one's free time and savings can easily come to seem trivial, almost self-evident. By contrast, failing to "serve the cause of God" for a few hours a month — or a week — is interpreted as a sign of ingratitude, selfishness, and social inadequacy.

To keep their flock under control, Bahá'í leaders also instill a moral reflex that disarms critical thought: believers are taught that criticism and public dispute are forbidden by divine law. Older religions, such as Islam and Christianity, do condemn slander and backbiting as grave sins, but the Bahá'í Faith takes this prohibition to an extreme, turning it into a command never to hurt another person's feelings.[1] One authoritative writing, quoted in various compilations, states: "Beware lest ye offend the feelings of anyone, or sadden the heart of any person, or move the tongue in reproach of and finding fault with anybody, whether he is friend or stranger, believer or enemy."[2]

The sincere desire of Bahá'ís to become respectable and loving individuals is certainly worthy of praise, and even admiration. However, once this principle is put into practice, it inevitably gives rise to all kinds of intractable difficulties. Indeed, it becomes impossible to engage in intellectual debate or express any opinion on a public issue, however trivial, without arousing

[1] One exception to that principle is applied to expelled members, as Bahá'í culture encourages believers to slander them.

[2] Abdu'l-Baha, *Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha Abbas*, p. 730

distress or disapproval in at least one person. When the leaders of the Faith forbid Bahá'ís from offending anyone, they effectively prevent them from speaking critically about the beliefs of others (including those of their fellow believers), even when those beliefs are objectively dangerous, morally corrupt, or downright deranged. This practice saddles Bahá'ís with the unfair burden of managing the wounded egos of people who cannot tolerate the slightest contradiction. As a result, it legitimizes emotional overreach and turns personal sensitivity into an instrument of social control.

In practice, Bahá'ís develop a permanent verbal filter: they learn to hold back their opinions and speak through a layer of self-censorship, even when there is no reason to tread so carefully. Ironically enough, this excessive politeness often ends up offending the very person it was meant to spare by making them feel as though they were too immature to hear an opposing view.

To tighten its emotional grip on believers, the Bahá'í leadership has also devised a form of mental conditioning that rests on two pillars: compulsory happiness, and a guilt-inducing mindset that makes every Bahá'í responsible for the misfortunes of the world. Once internalized, these two imperatives interfere with the inner life of many believers. Their emotional development is then steered away from self-awareness and into a subtler obedience that censors any feeling that might pierce their "armour."

The first pillar, compulsory happiness, is worked into believers through lectures and study circles devoted to moral instruction. In these settings, teachers draw on Bahá'í verses and pre-Bahá'í traditions to impress upon them the notion that

unhappiness and affliction are signs of rebellion against the perfect will of God. In other words, unhappiness is recast as both a soul-defiling sin and proof of spiritual weakness. In principle, no one would object to a spiritual community helping its members rise above the suffering of life. Yet in the Bahá'í Faith, as in other high-control religions, inner peace looks less like true serenity and more like the art of burying one's doubts and frustrations in silence. When tutors present happiness as the true hallmark of faith, they inevitably plant a vicious confusion in the minds of their listeners — namely, that an unhappy believer is not a true Bahá'í.

In the Bahá'í Faith, believers often test each other with a loaded question: are you happy? However innocent it may seem, this enquiry does raise some issues. First, its obvious intrusiveness can cross legitimate boundaries of tact, discretion and social restraint. Second, it pressures believers into a narrow model of faith that reduces spiritual life to a mere display of emotions, and that filters happiness through a rose-tinted lens. Finally, this question teaches them to tolerate personal overreach. In effect, it serves less to inquire into a believer's well-being than to test whether they have come to accept their lot within the Faith. As a result, some begin policing their fellow believers' commitment to the Faith, while others learn to counterfeit their own feelings. In the end, all members come to understand that they are held to an advertising standard[3] — that of a perfect, perfectly happy community — and that any Bahá'í who fails to meet this standard is seen as weak and wanting.

[3] "As humanity plunges deeper into that condition of which Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "*to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly*," so must the believers increasingly stand out as assured, orientated and fundamentally happy beings, conforming to a standard which, in direct contrast to the ignoble and amoral attitudes of modern society, is the source of their honor, strength and maturity." – The Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 1966

The general expectation to be happy instills a fear of spiritual inadequacy that is cemented by yet another imperative: the obligation to spread the religion by every available means, under threat of divine retribution. While Bahá'ís are quick to boast that their Faith forbids all proselytizing, anyone familiar with the community knows that this is nothing but a lie — a lie meant to garner sympathy from the authorities and the wider public. In fact, few religions are as relentlessly missionary as the Bahá'í Faith, which places every believer under a moral obligation to bring new converts into the fold. To conceal this reality, Bahá'ís have decided to redefine the very meaning of proselytizing, twisting the concept beyond recognition. In a letter dated January 3, 1982, the leaders of the Faith wrote: "Proselytizing implies bringing undue pressure to bear upon someone to change his Faith. It is also usually understood to imply the making of threats or the offering of material benefits as an inducement to conversion."[4] This quotation is often invoked within Bahá'í circles, even though it contains a glaring error: outside the community, the word "proselytizing" is not, as they claim, "usually understood" in this way. For most people, including scholars and lexicographers, "proselytizing" simply refers to any effort to win converts by appealing to reason or emotion — which is exactly what Bahá'ís do. Thanks to this semantic sleight of hand, they can conveniently brand other religions as crude proselytizers while dressing the very same missionary methods in the colours of modernity.

In the Bahá'í world, proselytizing is more than a religious obligation: it is a supreme moral calling that burdens believers with the fate of the world and the suffering of mankind. Indeed,

[4] *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963–1986, The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, 308.3

the deep-seated conviction that their Faith alone can end the crises of the modern age carries with it a fatal logic: every disaster in the news is seen as a necessary consequence of humanity's refusal to follow Bahá'u'lláh. In other words, believers reframe the tragedies of our times — from ongoing wars and inflation to organized crime and drug addiction — as the direct result of their own failure to convert the peoples of the world. This logic was made explicit by the Guardian of the Faith in a letter dated December 18, 1943: "There is so much suffering, such a great and desperate need for a true remedy and the Bahá'ís should realize their sacred obligation is to deliver the Message to their fellowmen at once, and on as large a scale as possible. If they fail to do so, they are really partly responsible for prolonging the agony of humanity."[5]

Bahá'ís do not merely fear being judged for failing to cure human civilization of its many vices: they are also haunted by the thought that this failure could actually unleash new catastrophes upon the world. More ominously, some believers are even terrified of somehow being punished in the afterlife for failing to convert others. A few Bahá'ís can be found who indeed feel responsible for the damnation of every soul they failed to guide onto the path of salvation. Taken together, all these negative emotions drive the faithful to put their own feelings aside and conform blindly to the dictates of the "Administrative Order," which is presented as the only channel "through which the spirit and guidance flow to the Bahá'ís and to mankind."[6]

[5] *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, 425
[6] *Ibid.* 426

In its present form, the Bahá'í community is defined by a culture of conformity so corrosive to individual expression that members find no other way to distinguish themselves except by outdoing one another in fidelity to dogma and obedience to sacrosanct institutions. In such an environment, the gaze of others, rather than inner peace, becomes the standard by which the quality of one's faith and personal worth are assessed. Instead of being guided toward spiritual growth, believers are held to a performance ideal that takes shape in the pursuit of sweeping expansion plans devised at the Bahá'í World Centre. These plans unfold in multi-year development cycles during which believers are pressed to meet carefully calibrated statistical targets, usually by increasing the number of religious workshops and community activities. In practice, they develop a pathological need to run themselves ragged chasing quotas, like dutiful employees.

The Bahá'í milieu is in fact so hostile to individual expression that even discussions of spiritual matters are governed by self-censorship and disapproval, with many official publications disparaging hermeneutics in favour of rote learning from approved literature. In a letter dated January 3, 1982, the leaders of the Faith wrote: "Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions."[7]

[7] *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963–1986, The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, 308.16

The message is deceptive. In this letter, Bahá'í officials appear to make a reasonable point, namely that no one may impose their opinion on anyone else. They also remind believers that they are free to read and study the sacred writings for themselves, as if this were not self-evident. But to anyone versed in the subtleties of Bahá'í administrative language, the message means something else entirely: personal opinions are worthless and, above all, potentially dangerous — and therefore suspect by default. Although it is rarely stated outright, this warning remains lodged in everyone's mind.

The leaders of the Bahá'í Faith stop short of forbidding believers from sharing their own interpretations and translations of the sacred writings. They have nonetheless managed to sow mistrust of any member who seeks to shed light on their meaning. This mistrust is then given a veneer of legitimacy by invoking Bahá'u'lláh's prohibition against establishing a clergy or priestly class within his religion. In fact, any recognition of spiritual or intellectual differences among believers is construed as a violation of this law. As a result, a genuinely anti-intellectual climate has taken hold of the community, and many believers fear that merely expressing their views already amounts to an overreach worthy of sanction. They know that anyone who publicly interprets a verse risks being accused of setting themselves up as an illegitimate authority or challenging the Administrative Order.

Rather than fostering a warm and spiritually nourishing environment, the Bahá'í community has come to prioritize the strict enforcement of its own version of "political correctness." The fear of straying from the official creed or prescribed line of conduct creates around the faithful a climate of spiritual

oppression that consumes much of their energy. To mitigate any anxiety, Bahá'í leaders offer them a safe refuge in the form of a carefully curated selection of writings whose interpretation must leave no room for uncertainty. Unfortunately, these (rather slim) compilations are riddled with defects: the selected passages are often contradictory, incomplete, or unsourced, while their supposedly infallible translations are marred by dubious and misleading word choices. In flagrant contradiction with their own standard of scholarship, the religious authorities have even included in these compilations texts they do not themselves recognize as authentic.

For instance, the *bahai.org* website, which serves as the religion's official showcase on the internet, includes a book entitled *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* in the "Authoritative Writings" section of its digital library, even though the statements it contains are classified as "pilgrims' notes."[8] This term refers to any second-hand account of a prophetic teaching which, however valuable it may appear to be, can under no circumstances be regarded as sacred or authoritative. This editorial choice shows how readily the Bahá'í system blurs the lines that should, in principle, distinguish canonical writings from unauthenticated reports. Through such maneuvers, Bahá'í authorities can reshape official doctrine at will, promoting documents of uncertain status whenever it suits their purpose, while concealing some of

[8] Bahá'í author Aziz Mboya has thus written on his website: *In online discussions, some Baha'i scholars have suggested that the writings in "The Promulgation of Universal Peace" are not authenticated, and should not be considered authoritative. Also, Abdu'l-Baha states, "Any narrative that is not authenticated by a Text should not be trusted".* [https://www.bahaiwritings.net/c_christ_successors.html]

In a letter dated October 22, 1996, the Universal House of Justice wrote: *For many of His addresses included in "The Promulgation of Universal Peace" and "Paris Talks", for example, no original authenticated text has yet been found.*

the Faith's doctrinal masterpieces, such as the *Kitáb-i-Badí'* and the *Persian Bayán*.

In English-speaking communities, access to scripture is further complicated by the mandatory use of a King James idiom in official translations, a register notoriously forbidding to the casual reader. To justify this policy, the leaders of the Faith have long maintained that a more accessible translation would undermine the dignity of the divine word. In practice, this means that believers are expected to internalize a pseudo-Elizabethan English in order to read texts originally written in Arabic or Persian, as though archaism were a necessary badge of religious respectability. Repeatedly discouraged from turning to modern-English translations, they must resign themselves to reading their own scriptures through linguistic barriers that compound the anti-intellectual pressure already weighing on them. Bahá'í leaders have gone so far as to ban all Persian translations of texts revealed in Arabic, preventing Iranian communities from accessing essential parts of their religious literature, most notably the obligatory daily prayers.

But their control over Scripture does not stop at the promotion of questionable translations and the suppression of unapproved alternatives. The leaders of the Faith never tire of claiming that the revealed writings of Bahá'u'lláh and his forerunner, the Báb (1819-1850), belong to all humanity and constitute a universal heritage meant for all to read and meditate upon. In reality, Bahá'í institutions have published and translated but a tiny fraction of them, offering all manner of excuses for keeping the rest out of circulation. As a result, their content can only be known through summaries that substitute for the unavailable texts, if such summaries exist at all. In addition, rather than

placing their sacred books and symbols in the public domain, Bahá'í leaders have chosen to assert exclusive intellectual property rights over them[9]. The word "Bahá'í" itself has even been registered as a trademark, enabling them to sue dissident groups in the United States[10]. By bringing such cases before the courts, Bahá'í authorities relentlessly pursue one objective: to prevent anyone from publicly identifying as Bahá'í unless they submit to their Administrative Order.

Bahá'í social life is so tightly regulated that every believer is expected to seek administrative authorization before undertaking anything that might be seen as affecting the Faith's public image. Members thus have to undergo (however reluctantly) a practice known as "review", by which they are required to submit any personal speech or writing concerning the Bahá'í Faith to a religious censor. In other words, no Bahá'í artist or academic may publish or circulate any work mentioning their Faith without the approval of official reviewers who may censor it in part or in whole and directly

[9] Several official documents, including *Lights of Guidance* (#363) and the legal notices of bahai.org, appear to treat the original writings of Bahá'u'lláh as subject to copyright. This is especially significant since bahai.org itself hosts Arabic and Persian originals of these writings under legal notices covering the site's textual content. Whether or not this claim is legally enforceable, the fact remains that the bulk of these writings is kept hidden from the public. Readers who know neither Arabic nor Persian must therefore rely on official translations whose legal status is less ambiguous, as they are protected by copyright. As for the calligraphic symbols of the Greatest Name and the Ringstone Symbol, they are registered as trademarks in the United States (*Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*, 5.11).

In *Lights of Guidance* (#363), a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated September 4, 1981, states that believers and spiritual assemblies may quote from the writings of the central figures "without obtaining clearance from the copyright holder." The paragraph is rhetorically revealing: while its purpose is to reassure Bahá'ís that they may freely quote the sacred texts, it also presupposes the existence of a copyright holder and admits that such freedom of quotation "may endanger copyrights." The passage thus leaves the status of the sacred writings in a state of calculated ambiguity, blurring the line between spiritual heritage, institutional control, and legal ownership.

[10] A) McDANIEL et al v. MIRZA AHMAD SOHRAB et al, Supreme Court, Special Term, New York County, March 31, 1941 (27 N.Y.S.2D 525)
B) *United States Patent Quarterly* 150
C) National Spiritual Assembly v. National Spiritual Assembly of, et al, No. 08-2306 (7th Cir. 2010)

intervene in its publishing process. This practice reveals a system of ideological policing whose purpose is not to foster free inquiry, but to protect the religion's brand image at the expense of its adherents' intellectual integrity.

The leaders' hold over the Faith does not stop at the control of scriptures and information; it also extends to the ownership of the holy sites in Acre and Haifa, in present-day Israel. Control over access to these places of pilgrimage gives the Institution a tremendous symbolic power over Bahá'ís, who must seek permission before visiting the shrines and comply with a strict protocol governing when and under what conditions they may do so.

When indoctrination fails to bring a believer into line, Bahá'í institutions resort to a system of sanctions. One form of disciplinary action consists in stripping the recalcitrant members of their "administrative rights." This severe punishment serves to isolate affected members from the rest of the community, as they find themselves barred from attending Bahá'í meetings, marrying other Bahá'ís, visiting the holy sites, electing their assemblies, or contributing to the funds. In other words, Bahá'ís are forced to live their faith through a system that redefines both their social rights and their religious obligations as administrative privileges, as permissions that can be revoked without further justification. Designed to protect the Institution above all else, this system threatens believers with being barred from marrying within the Faith or from undertaking their sacred pilgrimage should they travel to certain countries or publish their writings without authorization. If Bahá'í institutions were concerned with the well-being of their members, why would they deprive those who struggle to meet

the Faith's moral standards of the very means that might help them become better believers? Such a policy does not reflect genuine concern for the spiritual welfare of the faithful, but of an institution's willingness to protect its own interests through coercion.

Another, more radical form of disciplinary action is reserved for those regarded as a threat to the Administrative Order: excommunication. According to Bahá'í belief, there exists an evil force of supernatural origin that enters a believer the moment they begin to disbelieve — not in the Bahá'í God or his prophets — but in the claims of authority made by Bahá'í institutions. Once it takes hold of their soul, this force is said to become a grave spiritual disease that threatens the believer's salvation, turning their every word into a poison capable, at the slightest contact, of transforming one of the faithful into a full-blown heretic. This disease would be graver still because, like a genetic defect, it is passed down to one's offspring through reproduction.

In the Bahá'í world, excommunication is not a mere punishment: it officially declares a person possessed by this occult power. That declaration carries consequences far more serious than the loss of administrative rights. To prevent other believers from being exposed to this spiritual disease, Bahá'í authorities command the faithful to completely shun the excommunicated. In practice, when someone is excommunicated, their spouse must file for divorce, and their children must sever all contact with them. The rules are simple: a Bahá'í is forbidden to associate with — or even speak to — the excommunicated, under threat of sharing the same fate. As many outside observers have noted, although the Bahá'í Faith

denies being a cult, its treatment of internal critics follows a pattern strikingly similar to that of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology.

Excommunication is the Bahá'í leadership's ultimate weapon. It can be used to dissolve marriages, destroy families, wipe out entire communities, and, above all, silence the most troublesome critics. To avoid any scandal that might damage their public image, Bahá'í authorities take precautions before resorting to excommunication. In general, this process unfolds over a period ranging from several weeks to several years, during which they keep the targeted believer under surveillance and build a case file (read: a list of lies) to justify the sentence. In principle, the suspected member will be subjected to at least one interrogation, during which they are allowed to explain themselves and correct their conduct. If the Bahá'í religious police conclude that they have persisted in their schismatic attitude, a notice of excommunication is sent from the world headquarters in Haifa to their National Spiritual Assembly. The Assembly then announces the ruling to all concerned.

The bizarre beliefs surrounding Bahá'í excommunication ought to be studied. Indeed, it is worth noting that, unlike Muslims, Christians and Jews, Bahá'ís show little to no interest in the occult or the supernatural. Over time, Bahá'í philosophy has even come to favour a quasi-materialist view according to which magic, angels and otherworldly entities are but figments of the imagination. And yet, despite their apparent disdain for what they call "superstitions," Bahá'í leaders actually promote belief in a dark power that supposedly manifests itself whenever someone asks an embarrassing question or brings up an inconvenient truth. Did those who came up with such an idea

really believe that a doctrinal disagreement or a well-argued objection could become the dwelling place of a demonic force? Whatever the case, they carefully avoid explaining the nature of this most peculiar phenomenon, let alone seeking a cure or a vaccine against it.

Even outside the extreme case of excommunication, the Bahá'í system has little tolerance for believers who wish to disenroll in order to live their Faith outside its official framework. To retain control of its public image, the Institution has devised a special policy against Bahá'ís who seek to disengage quietly rather than openly oppose it. This policy is set out in a document entitled *Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies:* "Upon investigation an Assembly may learn that the person believes in Bahá'u'lláh but does not wish to participate in the affairs of the Baha'i community. If this is the case, his withdrawal should not be accepted, yet his wish not to participate in community life should be honored. The Assembly should strive to nurture each person and draw him closer to the Baha'i community and to make each feel he is a welcomed and valued member."[11] In other words, the Institution politely declines to deregister them. These believers have to remain on the community's mailing lists, in the religion's official statistics, and subject to the sanctions reserved for internal dissidents.

For many years, any request to withdraw from the Bahá'í community required a written declaration of apostasy in which the applicant had to recant their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. This humiliating ritual was used to keep believers captive within the Institution. Although Bahá'í authorities have since been forced

[11] Office of Assembly Development, *Developing Distinctive Baha'i Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*, Withdrawal from and Reinstatement of Membership (1998)

to reverse this policy, it still appears to be enforced in a number of countries. What remains unchanged is their systematic conflation of Bahá'í religious identity with a subscription to its administrative membership. To discourage Bahá'ís from ever leaving, the Institution would have them believe that spiritual allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh can never be disentangled from its many whims. The very idea of living the Faith outside its administrative structures is in fact presented as not merely illegitimate, but as logically absurd. The official literature accordingly describes the wish to leave the community without abandoning the Faith as "self-contradictory,"[12] and even asserts that "to accept the Cause without the administration is like accepting the teachings without acknowledging the divine station of Bahá'u'lláh."[13]

When asked by what standards their Faith can claim superiority over other communities, Bahá'ís may cite the following passage from *Foundations of World Unity*: "We must be united. We must love each other. We must ever praise each other. We must bestow commendation upon all people, thus removing the discord and hatred which have caused alienation amongst men. Otherwise the conditions of the past will continue, praising ourselves and condemning others; religious wars will have no end and religious prejudice, the prime cause of this havoc and tribulation, will increase."[14] But in order to reconcile its heart-warming ideal of universal brotherhood with its brutal policy of exclusion and control, the Bahá'í world must pour considerable resources into a propaganda machine that enables its members to sustain every contradiction and to justify every hypocrisy.

[12] The Universal House of Justice, letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 4 April 2001
[13] Shoghi Effendi, letter written on his behalf, 30 May 1930
[14] Abdu'l Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, "The Foundation of Religion"

However, keeping up such a charade comes at a price. The religion now crumbles under the weight of its own administration. Because it finds itself unable to function normally, the Bahá'í community has remained trapped in a stalemate for decades. Not only does its atmosphere of spiritual corruption swiftly drive away most of its few converts, but it also discourages its own youth from embracing the Faith's social values. In other words, Bahá'ís are forced to invest vast amounts of time, energy and money in missionary projects that invariably end in spectacular failure. Things have now reached the point where the community is bleeding members. In the continental United States, for instance, internal statistics show that the Bahá'í community has lost about 2,500 believers over the past five years, with membership falling from 77,290 in 2020[15] to 74,773 in 2025[16]. The same downward trend can be observed in many other countries around the world.

Today, the Bahá'í Faith finds itself in a cul-de-sac. Nothing seems capable of arresting its slow decline: not the construction of lavish temples in one country after another, not the multiplication of children's classes across neighbourhoods, and not even the attempts at door-to-door preaching by a handful of zealous believers who can at least soothe their disappointment with the thought that their Faith enjoys an excellent reputation. The religion only survives through a core of passionate and deeply indoctrinated members who stand ready to give their lives for their faith. On the other hand, a growing number of Bahá'ís and outside observers want to denounce the moral decay of the community and the contradictions in its teachings. They want the world to know that the leaders of the Bahá'í Faith

[15] National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, *Ridvan 2020 Annual Report*, p.17
[16] National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, *Ridvan 2025 Annual Report*, p.32

have abandoned their belief in the oneness of humanity in favour of a more sinister ideal: that of a world unified through censorship and coercion.

A comprehensive summary of the 12 mechanisms of control in the Bahá'í Faith

1. Restriction of activities.

Theology, hermeneutics, political expression, participation in labour unions, humanitarian work and self-initiated projects are either discouraged or forbidden. Bahá'ís are politically and intellectually neutralized, prevented from existing as independent moral agents, and treated as minors.

2. Promotion of mind-numbing activities

Bahá'ís are strongly incentivized to dedicate time, energy and money to uninteresting and inefficient community activities that are designed to weaken their critical thinking.

3. Promotion of martyrdom and self-sacrifice

Comparison with martyrs of past ages is used to delegitimize negative feelings and concerns.

4. Prohibition of criticism

Bahá'ís are forbidden from criticizing people, ideas and institutions. Defending oneself against abuse and falsehood is often construed as sinful conduct.

5. Compulsory happiness

The feeling of happiness is valued as a sign of moral superiority and spiritual advancement. Being unhappy with the community and its institutional lifestyle is interpreted as a personal shortcoming.

6. Cosmic guilt

Bahá'í institutions promote the idea that social crises, wars and other catastrophes are an indirect result of the believers' inability to convert more people.

7. Promotion of performance

Religious life is unpaid labour, as Bahá'ís must achieve pre-calculated statistical targets. Spirituality is redefined as a form of competition (1) between believers, and (2) between the Bahá'í community and other religious and non-religious organizations.

8. Information control

Bahá'í institutions deliberately conceal scriptures, historical materials, administrative documents, financial reports and membership statistics from believers and non-believers alike, while also imposing censorship on Bahá'í authors.

9. Semantic gaslighting

Officials of the Faith redefine words and use deliberately ambiguous language and double meanings to maintain both cognitive dissonance and plausible deniability.

10. Redefinition of social rights and religious obligations as administrative privileges.

Acts of worship, private ceremonies, and social relationships are merely “authorized”. Until they are not.

11. Demonization of dissent.

Perplexity about Bahá’í authority is interpreted as a demonic irruption into reality. Dissent is explained as an incurable spiritual disease that will drag contaminated believers into the lowest pits of hell.

12. Gatekeeping and trademarking of Bahá’í identity

Official institutions promote the idea that it is impossible to be a Bahá’í outside their administrative order. Independent Bahá’í identity is seen as illegitimate, illogical and unthinkable. Independent Bahá’í groups are sued.

Further reading

Karen Bacquet, *Enemies Within: Conflict and Control in the Bahá'í Community*

Juan Cole, *Fundamentalism in the Contemporary U.S. Bahá'í Community*

Denis McEoin, *Bahá'í Fundamentalism and the Academic Study of the Babi Movement*

Juan Cole, *Race, Immorality and Money in the American Bahá'í Community: Impeaching the Los Angeles Spiritual Assembly*

Juan Cole, *The Bahá'í Faith in America as Panopticon, 1963-1997*

Farida Fozdar, *The Bahá'í Faith: A Case Study in Globalization, Mobility and the Routinization of Charisma*

Denis McEoin, *Problems of Scholarship in a Bahá'í Context*

Denis McEoin, *The Crisis in Babi and Bahá'í Studies: Part of a Wider Crisis in Academic Freedom?*

Denis McEoin, *Challenging Apostasy*

Aziz Mboya, *50+ conflicts in the writings of Shoghi Effendi when compared to Bahá'í, Babi, Islamic and Christian Holy Writings*

Alison Marshall, *The human soul is the moral agent in creation*